

Kempthorne defends policy on BLM, OCS energy leases

Dan Berman, *E&E Daily* senior reporter

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne yesterday managed to deflect pointed questions from both sides on his department's oil and gas production policy during his first visit to the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee.

Kempthorne steered a middle road between Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.), who criticized Interior for selling too many leases in the Rocky Mountains, and Rep. John Peterson (R-Pa.), who demanded to know why the Bush administration continues to propose limited development of the outer continental shelf (OCS).

Hinchey, who next month will reintroduce his "America's Redrock Wilderness Act," a bill that would designate more than 9 million acres in Utah as wilderness, wants the Bureau of Land Management to take a second look at leases in Utah on "wilderness-quality" lands. Interior already has 24 million acres of land already leased but not currently in production, Hinchey said.

Since Congress has not designated the lands at issue in Utah as wilderness, BLM must consider them for leasing, Kempthorne said. "We have an obligation to manage for a multi-use approach," he said. "Absent a wilderness designation, we have to continue in our responsibility to partners unless that is changed."

BLM is advocating the use of newer technology with a reduced footprint on the ground to limit environmental impact, Kempthorne said. "The BLM is sensitive to that issue of wilderness characteristics," he said.

"Perhaps they have the tools but they certainly haven't used them," said Pete Downing of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, which has challenged former Interior Secretary Gale Norton's "No New Wilderness" settlement from April 2003 that opened up many of the lands in Utah Hinchey is attempting to designate as wilderness.

Under the deal, Interior agreed to cease designating land units as wilderness study areas, capping potential wilderness areas at 22.8 million acres, the total proposed under a 15-year inventory of BLM land completed in 1991. That invalidated the 1999 Utah Wilderness Inventory that Hinchey is using for his bill.

SUWA is currently appealing the settlement to the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, where oral arguments may be held this fall. Last September, a federal judge upheld the deal, saying environmental groups had not proved any harm to existing wilderness study areas ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 22, 2006).

After the hearing, Hinchey sent Kempthorne a letter asking Interior to stop offering oil and gas leases in areas "identified as containing wilderness characteristics."

An Interior spokesman said the department will respond to Hinchey "in a timely manner."

Meanwhile, Peterson questioned the administration's proposal to continue the ban on OCS leases along the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, noting the House energy bill last year would have dramatically increased OCS exploration.

"I'm not going to criticize you for producing energy," Peterson said.

"It makes absolutely no sense to continue a moratorium which is having such negative effects on our economy," he said. In a statement, Peterson pledged to use the appropriations process "to bring an end to this asinine policy."

Kempthorne said the Bush administration respects governors of coastal states who wish to limit drilling and acknowledged they are attempting to strike a middle ground. "Our approach is a balancing act," Kempthorne said. "I do not believe vibrant habitat and vibrant production are mutually exclusive."